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IV.—THE ENGLISH FABLIAU.

One feels inclined, like Bédier in *Les Fabliaux*, to apologize, at the beginning of this discussion, for dealing heavily with a light subject. Andrew Lang, to be sure, has spun the fabric of primitive imagination out of story threads from our simplest fairy tales. But there are no remnants of primitive thought to be discovered in the *fabliaux*, and few vestiges of ancient myth discernible in their narratives. One's only justification for approaching these *contes à rire* with anything but laughter must be a desire to search into the qualities which make "lewed peple loven tales olde," and especially the nature of the humor which preserves those called *fabliaux* from age to age. But a brief consideration of the nature and origin of the *fabliau* must precede an attempt to discover the characteristic quality of the English contribution to this literary form.

If one divests a *fabliau* of its minor qualities, such as verse, local color, and the depiction of character, there remains simply a humorous story. In the majority of *fabliaux*, and in all the best ones, this is not merely a jest, a quip, or a play upon words. It is usually a plot, simple, and often trivial enough, but depending for success, in part upon the true relation between its action and some quality of human nature, in part upon the originality and the excellence of that action. The deceit of wives, the gullibility of husbands, the greed of all mankind, vanity which blinds the best of us—such is the groundwork of its plots, and its episodes are humorous, not as a pun is humorous, but because they spring from and illustrate true qualities and true tendencies in universal human nature.

For example, the famous story of *La housse partie* tells

of the grandson who kept for the old age of his father one-half of the sack which that ingrate had ordered bestowed upon the poor and much-wronged grandfather. And *The Reeve's Tale* of Chaucer relates how the proud miller was himself beguiled by the two clerks whom he had wronged. In the first of these stories the moral points itself, in the second it is notably lacking; in the one the plot is not easily to be forgotten, in the other it is of little value apart from its local color and the characters which move through it; yet both have this in common, that human nature as it is, betraying itself in some characteristic fault, is the groundwork of each. This seems to be typical of nearly all the stories which we call *fabliaux*, as well as of many more which, for various reasons, cannot be distinguished by that title. And more than anything else it is this quality, perhaps, which makes these jesting narratives valuable and worthy of a literary treatment. For in them, as through colored glass, we see humanity in an aspect which more serious literature cannot supply to us.

With these humorous stories the fable and the apologue have at least this in common, that a reflection upon human nature lies behind their narratives. If so, since the power to observe and to generalize is not acquired in the earliest stages of primitive man, they are, presumably, less ancient than the folk tale; and, since a certain kind of insight is common to all three, they may be said to spring from much the same soil. The fable and the apologue, to be sure, point a moral, while the writer of real *fabliaux* can seldom be accused of a serious aim, yet the difference is only in point of view. One has observed that again and again man comes to grief through his own greed. Shall he point the moral? He may do so by a little fable of the *Disciplina Clericalis* in which the fox persuades the wolf to come down the well for the full moon cheese. Or shall he make fun of it and let

the moral take care of itself? A dozen suitable stories come to mind, but see how in the Middle English beast *fabliau* of *The Vox and the Wolf* this same little fable gets the bit in its teeth, runs away with the moral, and becomes a good story and brilliant satire upon contemporary society.

Thus it might be said that from the same observation one man has made fun, another sermons. And since these plots may be shifted from apologue or fable to *fabliau* or back, according to the purpose of the writer, the relationship among these three forms is even closer than this statement implies. It is not uninteresting to note that this has always been recognized by those who seek illustrative stories. There are few fable collections which do not contain some *fabliau* plots, and few mediæval sermon books or *exemplum* collections not enriched in the same manner.

But although we agree that the *fabliau* has sprung, like the fable, from an observation taken upon human nature we have not yet arrived at a definition which will be valuable in the consideration of a particular literature. For the study of a given literature the thousand little plots which make most of our fables and apologues, and are often the germ cells of the *fabliaux*, can scarcely be useful. Upon nothing has the race spirit and the *Zeitgeist* made less impression. Told over countries, preached in the churches, gleaned from manuscripts, carried over sea in ships, these little stories pass from tongue to tongue and under the eyes of many races. They are called anecdotes, good stories, fables, *exempla*, at will. Rolling stones, birds of passage which go from clime to clime and owe allegiance to no one of them, they often come from a region above and beyond any national peculiarity and localism, while, compared with theirs, the anonymity of the rest of mediæval literature is almost personal. Their ranks are swelled by additions from the brains of each generation, but, unless some master writer

enshrines them in literature, the condition for the immortality of these newcomers is that they shall lose their traits of race and time. Formless, without setting and without character, such stories have no more reference for one land than for another, and no significance for the literature in which they appear. And yet the land of their birth or their adoption may become the scene of their action. They may be given a local habitation and a name, while men of the period, with all that distinguishes the abstract from the concrete character, move through their story. Only when this happens do these tales become material for literary, rather than psychological, historical, or sociological, criticism.

With the fable this seldom occurs, for the actors are animals and the point is the moral; yet we have had a *La Fontaine*. With the apologue it is less infrequent. But with the stories told mainly for the humor of the side lights which they threw upon old human nature this was a process easy and much to be desired. It happened to a notable extent in Italy, and the *novella* literature resulted. In France, where invention was quicker, it gave us at an earlier period the fine *fabliaux* from which we take a convenient name for the verse form. In England the stories which resulted were fewer but of a quality by no means inferior.

In estimating them, and in attempting to discover what distinctive literary quality they possess, we shall readily eliminate all rolling stones whose moss of localism has not yet gathered. But the real *fabliaux* which remain we must value for something more than originality in plot, or be negligent of the just discussed nature of the form. For, since the *fabliau* is the offspring of the talk of the roads and of the inns, it is a doubtful business to praise plot alone, when it is probable that the best plots are ages old and have acquired their polish by long handling. Narrative skill in adaptation and expansion, good expression, good setting, all

should get their meed of praise. But must we not also heed an art which develops and makes more effective the reflective nature of the *fabliau*, and adds this to the attraction which a good story well told must always possess? The French, for example, are witty, inventive enough in the matter of stories, good plot handlers, thoroughly conscious of the satiric power of the *fabliau* story, yet often the character study suggested by the plot they have used so well finds no adequate expression. One seldom suspects, with them, that the *fabliau* is an apologue with a different point of view. The lemon, it seems, is well squeezed, but not squeezed dry.

The defects and merits of the English work can be made clear in a brief survey.

If the Anglo-Saxons had a taste for the humorous, it was dormant, with other good pagan qualities, in the monkish writers. One scarcely expects to find a *fabliau* in Old English. But not even a fable rewards careful searching. With a few borrowed narratives of a type called by the French *contes dévots*, the short story feebly begins its career, but there is no contribution to reflective narrative, much less to *fabliau*, by its literature.

Middle English is as rich in reflective stories as Anglo-Saxon is poor. Yet the majority of them are fables, apologues, and *fabliau* plots, which are not valuable for the attempt to discern the quality of the English *fabliau*, because they offer no grasping points. Their narrative is usually a direct translation. Their story has not been referred to English conditions, and they have taken no advantage of the reflective possibilities of their plots except to add sometimes a far-fetched moral. They are cosmopolitan, not racial, and they have little interest except to the student of comparative literature, and the indefatigable collector of the ubiquitous parallel.

The real English *fabliaux* are better than the contemporary narratives of the last group because their authors tell them either as their own stories or in their own way. No longer mere birds of passage, feathered alike in all climes, they have been caught and domesticated, or are natives to the soil itself. They fall into two strata, one in the 13th and early 14th centuries, the other in the late 14th.

From the first stratum many must be lost. But it is represented in our literature by several excellent stories, which present, however, nothing that was not done as well, and usually at an earlier period, in France. Genuine *fabliaux* certainly, and certainly of this period, are *Dame Siriz*, *The Pennyworth of Wit*, and, in spite of its best actors, *The Vox and the Wolf*. To these may be added a few more from the homily collections and elsewhere by those more generous in their attribution of date or originality.

*Dame Siriz*¹ was written probably in the Southwest and perhaps in the latter half of the 13th century. It is the old story of the woman beguiled by a procuress who puts pepper into the eyes of a dog to make it weep. The unknown source is probably a Latin *exemplum* rather than a French *fabliau*. But there is no doubt of the essential originality of the English version in everything except plot. The very spicy, colloquial dialogue is proof of this, and the homely realism of the details. The story, moreover, is localized in England by a reference to Botolfston. Yet there is no quality which might not be duplicated in the earlier work of the French *jongleurs*, and the poem, when compared with their best, is crude in rhythm and expression.

A much more finished production is *The Vox and the Wolf*,² written in the dialect of Kent or Sussex, also in the latter half of the 13th century. It is the familiar tale of the

¹ Ed. Mätzner, *Altenglische Sprachproben*, I, pp. 103 f.

² Ed. Mätzner, *Altenglische Sprachproben*, I, pp. 130 f.

well with buckets into which the guileful Reynard lures the trusting Isengrym. Nothing in all the branches of the great animal *epos* is more delightful than the shriving of Isengrym at the well head before he is permitted to enter into the paradise which Reynard says is below. This is in all the French versions, while the excellent little dialogue in the hen yard seems to be in the English alone. Come down and be bled, says Reynald to Chauntecleer. "For almes sake" I have "leten thine hennen blod;" and unless he does the same for him the cock may "sone axe after the prest." Up to the scene at the well head the unique variant of Branch 4, preserved in MS. 3334 of the Bibliothèque de L'Arsénal, is the closest analogue, while the ordinary version, as presented in Méon, t. I, p. 240, is nearer the latter half of the poem. In short, the English author can be tied down to no existing French original, and adds an episode found in no one of them. If he could write,

"Him were levere meten one hen
Than half an oundred wimmen,"

he could rearrange the narrative without assistance. So we grant him originality in plot handling, as well as the power to readapt French wit for English hearers, and to add spice of his own. Yet no one will claim that his poem is noticeably better than the French versions. It certainly possesses no characteristic definitely English or definitely new.

An old apologue idea is preserved in the Southeast Midland poem *A Pennyworth of Witte*,¹ preserved in a manuscript of about 1330. It is the story of a husband who tested wife and leman and found the former true. Kölbing too readily asserts that this is a French *fabliau* Englished.² The only French version of the story which we possess is quite

¹ Ed. by E. Kölbing, *Englische Studien*, VII, pp. 111 f.

² See Kölbing, *op. cit.*

different in detail, and the resemblances are those which oral tradition or memory would supply. In both English stories (for there is a later version) the localization in France is avoided, and the scene is moved so that the husband travels into France instead of away from it. Furthermore, the villain is much blacker, the heroine more noble than in Jehans D'Aubepierre's *De la bourse pleine de sens*. But, as with *The Vox and the Wolf*, one can claim no distinguishing quality for the English *fabliau*. The writer reaches the level of the French, but he adds nothing which may be accredited to his race.

A history of the English *fabliaux* would have to make more of these poems. Though it is true that models existed for them in the French, though the earliest is in a barbarous tongue, and the latest somewhat pedestrian, yet, if their average be that of the time, the French art of story telling had been well learned. And yet, at the best, here are only imitators, imitators who express the individuality of their race only by a somewhat unhappy trait; for if they tell the tales as well, they allow some of the bubbling Gallic wit, the *esprit gaulois*, characteristic of the true *fabliau*, to escape in the reworking. The English have not yet put their imprint upon the *fabliau*.

The step forward which English narrative took, in common with all English literature of the 14th century, is best exhibited perhaps in the religious literature. The flowering forth of the beautiful *contes dévots* from the mould of saints' legend can there be seen in all its stages. But so little of the *fabliau* literature was written down and preserved unto our day that we cannot say, here it was developing, here retarded. We must deal with individual works and with individuals. To this period of literary advance belongs the second stratum of *fabliaux*. It contains a number of those story microcosms which we have agreed to neglect. Gower's

work remains, in certain specimens to which the name fossil may be fitly applied, but all that is valuable for this inquiry is Chaucer's.

There are seven stories in the *Canterbury Tales* which may be fairly called *fabliaux*, and four others that belong in the same gallery. The praise of these stories fills a shelf of publications, but criticism is not lacking. They are unoriginal, write some French scholars; they are rambling, digressive, planless, cry the authors of manuals on short story writing. That they are unoriginal can be maintained only by a foreigner who employs convenient plot digests. Like all good story writers, Chaucer used the best available plot. His originality lies elsewhere, and it will be enough to show that he never spoiled the plots which were given to him. As for digressions, are there to be no more cakes and ale? Must we be held to the bare plot? May we have no humorous side issues, no apt "ensamples," no foraging by the way? Because a child will have the story and nothing but the story does a man require of a novel nothing but the plot? No master of "rethorike sweete," I suppose, was ever so "unenlumyned" as to desire much amputation or extraction in any of these stories. Yet Chaucer, like Shakespeare, has been charged with bad technique. Since the object of technique in narrative is to secure that excellence of total effect which no one denies him, a defence is unnecessary, but a closer inspection of the abused and delightful digressions which called forth the criticism will reveal an artistic purpose behind them, and help to define the distinctive characteristic of the English *fabliau*.

Let us put *The Merchant's Tale* upon the operating table and dissect it in the German fashion. The poem consists of 1174 lines. The first twenty-two begin the story much in the manner of a French *fabliau*: "Whilom ther was dwellynge in Lumbardye a worthy knyght that born was

of Pavye." But with the twenty-third line, and before the plot has begun to unfold, the poet drifts off into a deliciously ironical praise of wiving, which lasts until the 148th line. And now we return to the hero, but the wordy battle which wages over his choice of a wife has nothing to do with the plot. It is, rather, ironical dialogue which illustrates the character of the old knight and the quality of his folly. Only with line 446 does the plot begin to move. Then, with the bit in his teeth, Chaucer rides merrily through the remaining 728 lines, pausing only for brief and characteristic appeals to Fortune, to Ovyde, and to Salomone. Thus the story proper is in 750 lines, while humor, wit, moralizing, and suggestion of character employ 424.

Is this bad art? Consider first the story told in the 750 lines. The young wife loves the squire of her old, blind husband. Their love affair is discovered when, in the midst, sight is granted to the husband. Boccacio in the ninth *novella* of the seventh day tells very much the same story. He indulges in no introduction, and in no digressions,—in the absence of the latter resembling Chaucer more than at first appears, for, once started on the plot proper, the English poet keeps at his muttons until the end. Two differences between the two stories remain: one lies in the introduction to the English narrative; the other is this, that, throughout, Chaucer's story is made real by every probable circumstance, and particularly by all the personality which dialogue can give to his characters, whereas, with Boccacio, the plot's the thing, and it moves gracefully, but unreally, to its conclusion.

When one considers the nature of the *fabliau*, that it is based upon human nature and must deal with real humanity, this seems a very noteworthy difference. But a yet greater one lies in the substance of the remaining 445 lines of the story, Chaucer's introduction, which has no counterpart in the Italian *novella*.

Like all *fabliaux*, this famous little story of the pear tree is based upon the error of human nature, here just the universal weakness of man, whose self-conceit blinds him to his own infirmities, and whose silly optimism makes him think that the images his sentimental fancy paints for him are true copies of bliss to come. It is this universal quality which makes the story something more than a rather spicy practical joke, and this, too, made it profitable for story mongers to bear the tale from race to race. Without it the narrative would have just the value which would appertain to *The Ass in the Lion's Skin* if men ceased to clothe themselves in virtues not their own, or were no more unmasked when so doing.

Now a consideration of the 445 introductory lines just mentioned shows that they are devoted to an exposition and illustration of just this human error which lies beneath the story, namely, of the folly of the man that believes all matrimony to be "parfit bliss," and the folly of the old husband who cannot see that his age may be a disability in the eyes of his young wife. These twin follies are born in one mind, that of January, the hero of the piece, and most of the so-called digression consists of his own discourse on matrimony, whereby Chaucer convicts him out of his own mouth. This comment upon the text,—for although Chaucer is not moralizing, so it may figuratively be called,—is what chiefly distinguishes his work upon this story from the Italian's, and, to go further afield, sets apart his method from that of Italian story-tellers and French jongleurs.

For it seems that Chaucer, with an instinct for spirit stronger than the feeling for form which keeps the Latin races to the story, has apprehended the true potential value of this plot. For him it is not just a good tale to be retold in the French style. Pondered more deeply, it is a treatise upon humanity; it is a specimen from which the living

creature may be reconstructed. And to reconstruct is his work, in which, for method, he chooses to bring back personality through life and speech into the bare bones of the narrative. And not content with this, by parading the love-sodden January upon his stage, he makes so much the more vivid the succeeding action, and the keen reflection upon human nature which it implies. Something in unity of narrative impression suffers of course. His work lacks the perfect structure of the simple *lais* of Marie of France. But the comparison between his work and hers is the old one between Shakespeare and Racine, between Kipling and Maupassant. We will decide, forever, I suppose, according to the land we were born in, but in this case at least that Chaucer better appreciated the nature and the possibilities of the *fabliau* story seems to be susceptible of demonstration.

If space permitted, this characteristic quality of Chaucer's work might be illustrated by an analysis of all his *fabliaux*. But a brief review will be sufficient to indicate how thoroughly he realized the nature of his material and how different was his method from the less discerning art of his French rivals.

For example, the Sumnor's tale of the begging friar, when stripped of its character study, is a mere anecdote. Chaucer uses it to satirize the greed of friars, and to put in the pillory a hypocritical beggar. His method is to expand the begging speech of the friar until it becomes the principal part of the first 384 lines. By a careful realism he makes the "frere" a lively personation, and succeeds in describing him by his own tongue. An Italian or French jongleur would presumably have begun the story near the point where the friar ends his sermon.

The Reeve's Tale is a practical joke story of a type very common in the French *fabliau*. It could be told simply for the humor of the adventure of the "clerkes tweye." So, indeed, does Jean de Boves tell it in *De Gombert et des deux*

clers, which Leclerc praises as Chaucer's original. But the Englishman, getting his plot there, no doubt, adds his famous description of the proud miller and his well born wife, to the effect that we shall see that it is pride which is getting a fall here, and yet recognize the characters as individuals and not types.

To analyze all of these stories would be to savor of Chaucer's favorite vice, for he too seldom is like Justinus of whom it is said, "for he wolde his longe tale abregge, He wolde noon auctoritee allege." Yet while all are not equally susceptible of development for reflective purposes, from all may be drawn evidence to illustrate this point. Subtract, for example, from the 625 lines of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* that part which corresponds to the thirty-five lines of the fable of Marie of France, and consider the purpose and effect of Chaucer's padding. Or note *The Manciple's Tale*, in which, since the characters of the fable were not attractive subjects for development, the poet has tried to make his story reflective by adding example and moralizing, failing this time, because he emphasizes woman's weakness and not the point of the story. In no case, when some quality of human nature is to be illustrated by the story, does he depend, like Gower, upon plot alone.

Nor, in this connection, must we omit to notice that digression for the sake of character development is, in the shorter stories, typical only of the *fabliaux*. Sandras noted many years ago¹ that Chaucer departed very little from his original in legends, and only to bring in classical allusions, or for the purpose of satire in his *lais*, while in his *fabliaux* he became a creator by his added details, by the eloquence of his personages, and by his truth to character. And since his method springs from the nature of his material, this is just what we should expect.

¹ E. G. Sandras, *Étude sur G. Chaucer considéré comme imitateur des trouvères*.

Thus to discover a really original characteristic in the English *fabliau* it has been necessary to eliminate all merely cosmopolitan stories from the discussion, and afterwards to set aside the genuine *fabliaux* of the earlier English stratum. The sought-for quality seems to appear in Chaucer. In him, it was the art to discover and employ the reflective power of a *fabliau* story, but in praising his genius one must not forget that this desire to moralize, to seek spirit rather than form, is characteristic of the English mind. If it does not appear in other English *fabliaux*, where race spirit has not been allowed to mould the foreign material, it may be discovered elsewhere, even in this comparatively unoriginal period. Langland possessed it, and so did Robert Manning of Brunne. Its result in Chaucer is not typical of all English *fabliaux*, but in him, at least, it is a typical English spirit working upon the *fabliau* form.

This is illustrated, by converse, in the unoriginal work of Gower. It does not seem that Gower is inferior to Chaucer in the art of handling a plot. In arrangement of incident and in proportion he is certainly his equal, and sometimes his superior. He has little traffic with the pure *fabliau*, perhaps because of the nature of his poem, perhaps because, as I have tried to show, the *fabliau* seldom has a ponderable value unless it is a character sketch, and Gower sought the ponderable, and could not develop character. But in the *Confessio Amantis* he employs a number of apologues which give him just the opportunity that was Chaucer's in, say, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Indeed, he retells the story of Phebus and Cornide, which was given to the Manciple among the Canterbury pilgrims. But in these narratives he takes no advantage of the reflective possibilities. And, co-ordinately, he makes no use of any art which might spring from the temperament of his own race, and indeed of no art whatsoever except the art of simple tale-telling, which he must be

allowed to possess. And, consequently, his stories, like the *fabliaux* discussed in the earlier part of this paper, possess no more of the characteristic quality of the English *fabliau*, than do the novels of Charles Brockden Brown of the characteristic quality of American fiction. He is at best a teller of correctly told stories, and to Chaucer we must return for proof of originality in the *fabliau*.

After the 14th century English literature lost, for a while, any original impulses that it may have possessed. But the English *fabliau*, as a literary form, had already been established and been given an individual and characteristic form. Chaucer was like a scientist who applies for great results a law whose implications had been only imperfectly realized by its framers. He borrowed a form from his French masters and infused it with a new, a proper, and what seems to be a more profitable spirit. Not forgetting to allow for the power of genius, which knows no race, perhaps we may recognize in the result the impress of the English mind upon the *fabliau*, and the contribution of the race to that literary form.

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